

# President Wilson's Business Message

[An address delivered by the president of the United States at the third annual meeting of the Chamber of Commerce of the United States, February 3, 1915.]

I feel that it is hardly fair to you for me to come in in this casual fashion among a body of men who have been seriously discussing great questions, and it is hardly fair to me, because I come in cold, not having had the advantage of sharing the atmosphere of your deliberations and catching the feeling of your conference. Moreover, I hardly know just how to express my interest in the things you are undertaking. When a man stands outside an organization and speaks to it he is too apt to have the tone of outside commendation, as who should say, "I would desire to pat you on the back and 'Good boys; you are doing well!'" I would a great deal rather have you receive me as if for the time being I were one of your own number.

Because the longer I occupy the office that I now occupy the more I regret any lines of separation; the more I deplore any feeling that one set of men has one set of interests and another set of men another set of interests; the more I feel the solidarity of the nation—the impossibility of separating one interest from another without misconceiving it; the necessity that we should all understand one another, in order that we may understand ourselves.

There is an illustration which I have used a great many times. I will use it again, because it is the most serviceable to my own mind. We often speak of a man who can not find his way in some jungle or some desert as having "lost himself." Did you never reflect that that is the only thing he has not lost? He is there. He has lost the rest of the world. He has no fixed point by which to steer. He does not know which is north, which is south, which is east, which is west; and if he did know, he is so confused that he would not know in which of those directions his goal lay. Therefore, following his heart, he walks in a great circle from right to left and comes back to where he started — to himself again. To my mind that is a picture of the world. If you have lost sight of other interests and do not know the relation of your own interests to those other interests, then you do not understand your own interests, and have lost yourself. What you want is orientation, relationship to the points of the compass; relationship to the other people in the world; vital connections which you have for the time being severed.

## DANGERS OF FALSE ADVERTISING

I am particularly glad to express my admiration for the kind of organization which you have drawn together. I have attended banquets of chambers of commerce in various parts of the country and have got the impression at each of those banquets that there was only one city in the country. It has seemed to me that those associations were meant in order to destroy men's perspective, in order to destroy their sense of relative proportions. Worst of all, if I may be permitted to say so, they were intended to boost something in particular. Boosting is a very unhandy thing. Advancing enterprise is a very handsome thing, but to exaggerate local merits in order to create disproportion in the general development is not a particularly handsome thing or a particularly intelligent thing. A city can not grow on the face of a great state like a mushroom on that one spot. Its roots are throughout the state, and unless the state it is in, or the region it draws from, can itself thrive and pulse with life as a whole, the city can have no healthy growth. You forget the wide rootages of everything when you boost some particular region. There are dangers which probably you all understand in the mere practice of advertisement. When a man begins to advertise himself there are certain points that are somewhat exaggerated, and I have noticed that men who exaggerate most, most quickly lose any proper conception of what their own proportions are. Therefore, these local centers of enthusiasm may be local centers of mistake if they are not very wisely guided and if they do not themselves realize their relations to the other centers of enthusiasm and of advancement.

The advantage about a Chamber of Commerce of the United States is that there is only one way to boost the United States, and that is by seeing to it that the conditions under which business is done throughout the whole country are the best

possible conditions. There can not be any disproportion about that. If you draw your sap and your vitality from all quarters, then the more sap and vitality there is in you the more there is in the commonwealth as a whole, and every time you lift at all you lift the whole level of manufacturing and mercantile enterprise. Moreover, the advantage of it is that you can not boost the United States in that way without understanding the United States. You learn a great deal. I agreed with a colleague of mine in the cabinet the other day that we had never attended in our lives before a school to compare with that we were now attending for the purpose of gaining a liberal education.

## HOW TRUTH PREVAILS

Of course, I learn a great many things that are not so, but the interesting thing about that is this: Things that are not so do not match. If you hear enough of them, you see there is no pattern whatever; it is a crazy quilt. Whereas, the truth always matches, piece by piece, with other parts of the truth. No man can lie consistently, and he can not lie about everything if he talks to you long. I would guarantee that if enough liars talked to you, you would get the truth; because the parts that they did not invent would match one another, and the parts that they did invent would not match one another. Talk long enough, therefore, and see the connections clearly enough, and you can patch together the case as a whole. I had somewhat that experience about Mexico, and that was about the only way in which I learned anything that was true about it. For there had been vivid imaginations and many special interests which depicted things as they wished me to believe them to be.

Seriously, the task of this body is to match all the facts of business throughout the country and to see the vast and consistent pattern of it. That is the reason I think you are to be congratulated upon the fact that you can not do this thing without common counsel. There isn't any man who knows enough to comprehend the United States. It is a co-operative effort, necessarily. You can not perform the functions of this chamber of commerce without drawing in not only a vast number of men, but men, and a number of men, from every region and section of the country. The minute this association falls into the hands, if it ever should, of men from a single section or men with a single set of interests most at heart, it will go to seed and die. Its strength must come from the uttermost parts of the land and must be compounded of brains and comprehensions of every sort. It is a very noble and handsome picture for the imagination, and I have asked myself before I came here today, what relation you could bear to the government of the United States and what relation the government could bear to you?

## CONTACT WITH THE GOVERNMENT

There are two aspects and activities of the government with which you will naturally come into most direct contact. The first is the government's power of inquiry, systematic and disinterested inquiry, and its power of scientific assistance. You get an illustration of the latter, for example, in the department of agriculture. Has it occurred to you, I wonder, that we are just upon the eve of a time when our department of agriculture will be of infinite importance to the whole world? There is a shortage of food in the world now. That shortage will be much more serious a few months from now than it is now. It is necessary that we should plant a great deal more; it is necessary that our lands should yield more per acre than they do now; it is necessary that there should not be a plow or a spade idle in this country if the world is to be fed. And the methods of our farmers must feed upon the scientific information to be derived from the state departments of agriculture, and from that taproot of all, the United States department of agriculture. The object and use of that department is to inform men of the latest developments and disclosure of science with regard to all the processes by which soils can be put to their proper use and their fertility made the greatest possible. Similarly with the bureau of standards. It is ready to supply those things by which you can set norms, you can set bases, for all the scientific processes of business.

I have a great admiration for the scientific parts of the government of the United States,

and it has amazed me that so few men have discovered them. Here in these departments are quiet men, trained to the highest degree of skill, serving for a petty remuneration along lines that are infinitely useful to mankind; and yet in some cases they waited to be discovered until this Chamber of Commerce of the United States was established. Coming to this city, officers of that association found that there were here things that were infinitely useful to them and with which the whole United States ought to be put into communication.

## GOVERNMENT INQUIRY AND INFORMATION

The government of the United States is very properly a great instrumentality of inquiry and information. One thing we are just beginning to do that we ought to have done long ago: We ought long ago to have had our bureau of foreign and domestic commerce. We ought long ago to have sent the best eyes of the government out into the world to see where the opportunities and openings of American commerce and American genius were to be found—men who were not sent out as the commercial agents of any particular set of business men in the United States, but who were eyes for the whole business community. I have been reading consular reports for 20 years. In what I came to regard as an evil day the congressman from my district began to send me consular reports, and they ate up more and more of my time. They are very interesting, but they are a good deal like what the old lady said of the dictionary, that it was very interesting, but a little disconnected. You get a picture of the world as if a spotlight were being dotted about over the surface of it. Here you see a glimpse of this, and here you see a glimpse of that, and through the medium of some consuls you do not see anything at all. Because the consul has to have eyes and the consul has to know what he is looking for. A literary friend of mine said that he used to believe in the maxim that "everything comes to the man who waits," but he discovered after awhile by practical experience that it needed an additional clause, "provided he knows what he is waiting for." Unless you know what you are looking for and have trained eyes to see it when it comes your way, it may pass you unnoticed. We are just beginning to do, systematically and scientifically, what we ought long ago to have done, to employ the government of the United States to survey the world in order that American commerce might be guided.

But there are other ways of using the government of the United States, ways that have long been tried, though not always with conspicuous success or fortunate results. You can use the government of the United States by influencing its legislation. That has been a very active industry, but it has not always been managed in the interest of the whole people. It is very instructive and useful for the government of the United States to have such means as you are ready to supply for getting a sort of consensus of opinion which proceeds from no particular quarter and originates with no particular interest. Information is the very foundation of all right action in legislation.

## BUSINESS AND LEGISLATION

I remember once, a good many years ago, I was attending one of the local chambers of commerce of the United States at a time when everybody was complaining that congress was interfering with business. If you have heard that complaint recently and supposed that it was original with the men who made it, you have not lived as long as I have. It has been going on ever since I can remember. The complaint came most vigorously from men who were interested in large corporate development. I took the liberty to say to that body of men, whom I did not know, that I took it for granted that there were a great many lawyers among them, and that it was likely that the more prominent of those lawyers were the intimate advisors of the corporations of that region. I said that I had met a great many lawyers from whom the complaint had come most vigorously, not only that there was too much legislation with regard to corporations, but that it was ignorant legislation. I said, "Now, the responsibility is with you. If the legislation is mistaken, you are on the inside and know where the mistakes are being made. You know not only the innocent and right things that your corporations are doing, but you know the other things, too. Knowing how they are done, you can be expert advisors as to how the wrong things can be prevented. If, therefore, this thing is handled ignorantly, there is nobody to blame but yourselves." If we on the outside